GOD'S WAY WITH PEOPLE
Luke 13:1-5
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The little boy in the hospital bed was worried about something more than his pneumonia when the minister dropped by. He had been very sick, but he was doing better now, at least physically. After a little talk about the wonderful way God works in our bodies to heal a cut finger or mend a broken bone or recover from illness, the boy suddenly asked the question on his mind: "Did God make me sick because I was bad?" Then he told the story of his guilt. In brief, he had disobeyed his mother and his little sister had nearly been injured as a result. Soon after, the boy became ill, very seriously ill. Was God punishing him? So the minister took time to explain that God doesn't work that way.

Children are much more open in asking such questions, of course, but the attitude even of sophisticated adults often hints at a similar concern. While I was no great fan of the "Maude" television show, still I can remember one line that I heard repeated at least once on each segment I saw. The line was delivered by Maude whenever husband Walter had done something which especially outraged her: "God will get you for that, Walter!" It was a funny line, but sometimes the audience laughter seemed a little nervous and self-conscious.

How does God treat people? Does He send calamity and illness and strife to punish us for wrong-doing? The whole life of Jesus answers that question implicitly. On one occasion He gave a very direct answer. The Gospel according to Luke records the incident in the thirteenth chapter, beginning at the first verse:

> "There were some present at that very time who told him of the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mingled with their sacrifices. And he answered them, 'Do you think that these Galileans were worse sinners than all the other Galileans, because they suffered thus? I tell you, No; but unless you repent you will all likewise perish. Or those eighteen upon whom the tower in Siloam fell and killed them, do you think that they were worse offenders than all the others who dwelt in Jerusalem? I tell you, No; but unless you repent you will all likewise perish'."

Some people came to Jesus and cited the case in which Pontius Pilate had ordered the deaths of some Galileans. He had them killed precisely while they were in the act of preparing their temple sacrifices, massacred while doing their religious duty. How does that square with a God of justice? And Jesus replied by telling about another well-known incident.

The tower of Siloam was part of a public works project headed by Pontius Pilate, the Roman governor of Judea. The population of Jerusalem was growing by leaps and bounds so the city needed more and more water. Pilate's plan was to get water from the springs in the hills south of the city. In order to do that, an aqueduct would have to be built -- an extensive system of pipes and troughs to carry the water into Jerusalem. The aqueduct had to slope gradually downhill all the way, which meant that where large hills were in the way it had to go underground. It also meant that, where there were valleys, tall towers had to be built to support the water line at the right slope. While one of these towers was being built, the tower at Siloam, it fell and killed eighteen of the workmen.

When news of this accident reached Jerusalem, many people thought it had served the eighteen right, that they had been punished by God for their sins.

After all, the eighteen had been working for the hated enemy Pilate. They were even being paid from the Temple funds which Pilate had confiscated illegally.

But when Jesus heard this kind of talk, He gave a very direct answer: "No." "Those eighteen upon whom the tower in Siloam fell and killed them, do you think that they were worse offenders than all the others who dwelt in Jerusalem? I tell you, No." God did not cause the tower to fall on eighteen men in order to punish them for sinfulness. The fact is that God does not treat people that way.

Now, let's come at the question through a contemporary event - just a few years ago in another city. A man in his early thirties was completely devastated, simply reduced to tears as he and his wife talked to their minister. The night before, their three-year-old son had died in the hospital after a long and valiant struggle with brain cancer. There had been heroic surgery and radiation and drugs and times of improvement and hope, but it had all come down to this: their beautiful, bright son was dead.

The father's grief was more than he could bear, partly because his grief was complicated by guilt. As he poured out his emotions to the minister, he admitted he had been an unfaithful father and husband. It was not a case of adultery, but it was no less serious. For a long time he had had as little to do with his family as possible. He provided financially for them - quite well, in fact. And he slept at home every night. But there was not much more. He thought of his family as a millstone around his neck, greatly restricting his personal freedom. He had known for a long time that he was being a poor husband and father. It hadn't bothered him much; he needed his freedom. But now he saw it all differently and he was deeply sorry. He had seen in a flash of insight what it all meant, or so he thought. And so he told the minister he knew that God had taken his little son in retribution for his sins.

The minister asked for the family Bible. It was not his usual counseling technique, but he remembered something specific. He turned to Psalm 103, the same one we read responsively a few minutes ago, and he quietly read these words: "(The Lord) has not treated us as our sins deserve or punished us for our misdeeds...As a father has compassion on his children, so the Lord has compassion on us. For he knows how we were made, he knows full well that we are dust." Then the minister tried to say in his own words that God deals with us, His children, in love, not in vengeance.

It is a truth which needs to be emphasized again and again. My experience is that many people think God sends trouble as repayment for their sins. It is true that some persons, like this father, have been shocked into a better way of life because of a tragic experience. That is to the good. But that is not to say that God sends trouble to teach us what we would not otherwise learn. The way I see it is that He <u>permits</u> us to get into trouble. That is far different from saying that He wishes it upon us. And therein is a basic key to life.

The best explanation I know runs like this: in the process of putting people on earth God gave us sufficient freedom to make our own moral choices. God voluntarily restricted His own omnipotence, voluntarily limited His limitless power. He drew a circle around an area of life and made mankind responsible for it and refused ever after to intrude upon it. This defined, sacred area He placed completely in the hands of humans. He did this because there was no other way by which people could grow to spiritual maturity.

This involved a great risk on God's part. If He had not taken that risk we would have been denied the only experiences which make personal growth possible. All parents know that there are risks involved when they give their teenagers their car keys for the first time, no matter how well they have done in drivers' training. But parents also know that if they do not take that risk, they will keep their son or daughter from learning the proper use of a car. There may well be some accidents. In fact, some parents spend a lifetime of regret wondering if they should have allowed as much freedom as they did, cars and otherwise. And yet, painful as taking the risk of freedom may be, the alternative is much worse. It is very difficult, perhaps impossible, for children ever to become responsible adults if their parents consistently refuse them the opportunity to use their freedom.

Now, let's deal with imagination for a moment. Suppose that God had chosen to create man without this freedom. The Almighty could then have manipulated people the way a puppet is moved around by strings held in the puppet master's hands. Man-the-puppet would have been safe. He could not wander far away from his heavenly Master. He would be sure to do God's will, because he would have no choice. Mankind would have been a perfectly tamed, obedient creature and God would have been the complete master of the world's affairs.

What a relief that would have been! There would have been no painful accidents, no sinful rebellion by men. The world could have been spared all manner of strife and war. Everything would have been peaceful and perfect. Only one thing missing - human freedom. But that is the one ingredient which could not be omitted if man was to have a chance to become spiritually mature.

Did God give us, His children, too much freedom? Would this world have been a happier place if He had held the reins a little tighter? The Old Testament suggests that God himself had second thoughts about His creation. The writers of Genesis portray Him as seeing the rebellion of Adam and Eve, watching with horror Cain's murder of Abel, and wondering whether He had given His creatures too much freedom. As early as the sixth chapter of Genesis, we read of God's discouragement: "The Lord saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every imagination of the thoughts of his heart was only evil constantly. And the Lord was sorry that He had made man on the earth." Then follows the story of Noah and the ark - God's decision to make a fresh start by causing a great flood in which all other people perish.

But the story of the flood confirms God's original decision: that human freedom is right and good. God admitted He had been impatient with His people and vowed never to let that happen again. Genesis has God saying to Noah after the flood is over, "I establish my covenant with you, that never again shall all flesh be cut off by the waters of a flood." According to the ancient writers, God had decided once and for all that, though there were great risks in giving people so much freedom, it simply had to be that way if people were to grow spiritually. There would be strife and selfishness and war; but without the possibility of all those evils, men and women would never have the chance to grow into a full, deep, loving relationship with their heavenly Father. Without freedom a human could be a puppet, but he could never be a person. Without freedom, there is no other way by which children can become responsible, loving adults; no other way men and women can become truly sons and daughters of God.

So, we affirm that God has given His people a freedom and a power because He loves us and desires our freely-offered love of Him. That God loves us is the very essence of our faith. That is God's way with people: love, not vengeance.

Our heavenly Father, thank you for your love which transcends all the pain and turmoil of the world. Thank you for proving that love by giving the Christ to a sinful humanity. Thank you for daily signs of love offering us power to become fully human. May your love be the vision which makes us free to love in return, the vision of living to our full potential in Christ's name.

Amen.